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# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

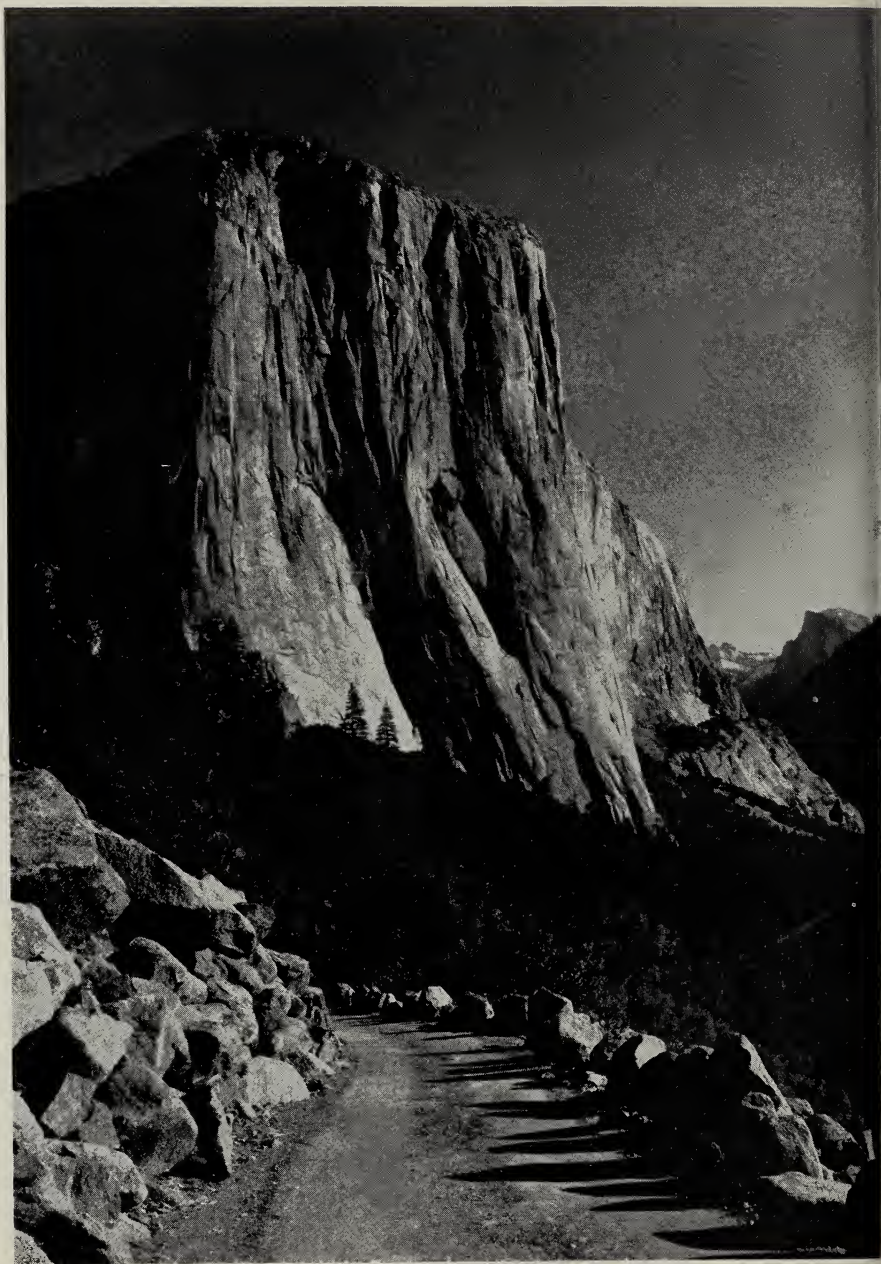
VOLUME XXXIII • NUMBER 6

JUNE 1954



*View toward Mt. Florence from Glacier Point after snowstorm  
—Ansel Adams*

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El Capitan from old Big Oak Flat Road.

*Anderson*



# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF

THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND

THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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## THE FIRST TELEGRAPH WIRE LAID TO YOSEMITE VALLEY

By W. M. Sell

EDITOR'S NOTE): This interesting account of early-day communications in Yosemite is taken from an old newspaper clipping deposited in the Yosemite Museum Research Library. The name of the newspaper and the date of original publication of this story are unknown. The amplifying statements appearing at the end of the article were compiled by Mr. Homer W. Robinson, now acting superintendent of Millerton Lake National Recreation Area.

In the year 1870 there lived in Sonora, Tuolumne County, California, three men who conceived the idea of building a telegraph line from there to Yosemite Valley, a distance of 60 miles. These men were named Levi Street, an attorney-at-law, his brother Harlow Street, postmaster and proprietor of a book store, and Charlie Street, a son of the latter, who was the Western Union telegraph operator at Sonora at that time.

In looking for material with which to construct this proposed line, these gentlemen found near Garrote (now called Groveland) a lot of heavy wire cable, formerly used for supporting a water flume over a deep canyon. Believing this would answer their purpose, they purchased this cable, unwound the strands of wire, rolled the single wires into coils convenient for handling, and distributed this material between Sonora and Yosemite.

In 1871 actual construction commenced from Sonora, the wire being hung to trees almost the entire distance. When the wire was completed

to Garrote, a distance of about 20 miles, an office was opened there for commercial business, with B. L. Savory, the hotel proprietor of that town, as operator. Construction continued, until in the fall of 1871 the wire was complete to Black's Hotel, at the foot of Sentinel Rock in Yosemite Valley. A set of telegraph instruments in position on a table was left in the office of Black's Hotel, but as no operator accompanied the construction outfit, the instruments were not connected to the main line.

In the early part of 1872 the Streets started a crew from Sonora, with instructions to commence at Garrote and repair this wire to Yosemite, and to extend it from Black's Hotel to Hutchings's Hotel, move the instruments, and set up the office in Hutchings's Hotel. This crew was composed of Harlow Street Jr., Scott Wyckoff, myself, and a driver who acted as setter up of camp and cook. I had been engaged to remain in Yosemite as operator.

Arriving at Black's Hotel we found that Mr. Black was absent. We communicated our moving instructions

to Mrs. Black who vigorously objected to our taking the instruments from the hotel office. However, we carried out our instructions, and that evening as we were about to connect the instruments to the main line, four men came into the office, which was the office of Hutchings's Hotel. At this time Mr. J. M. Hutchings, who was also justice of the peace, was present, watching our work. The leader of these four men was A. G. Black, proprietor of Black's Hotel, who started the following conversation:

Black—"Good evening, gentlemen."

Crew—"Good evening, sir."

Black—"By what authority do you move this telegraph office?"

Street—"By authority of my father."

Black—"Show me your authority."

Street—"I have none except by word of mouth."

Black—"Word of mouth won't go with me. Mr. Hutchings, arrest these men."

Hutchings—"Be calm Mr. Black, be calm. What have these boys done?"

Black—"They have stolen this telegraph office."

The crew giggled and this made Black furious.

Black (in a rage)—"I have come here to take this office. Peaceably if I can, but forcibly if I must, and here are the men to do it," making a sweep of his hand toward his three large Italian companions.

Street—"Take it Mr. Black, take it."

Black—"I am going to Bull Creek tomorrow, will be back on May 3rd, and if this office is not back in my hotel then, somebody will get hurt."

And then Mr. Black and his army marched out, and forgot to return.

As soon as we could recover our balance we were hard at work connecting up that set of instruments. We were delighted when my first call for Sonora (So) was promptly answered, and we were soon telegraphing our experience with Mr. Black to Mr. Harlow Street. He cheered us up by saying, "Don't pay any attention to what Black says; he is running a bluff and trying to scare you boys."

And thus it was that the first telegraph signal ever sent out of Yosemite Valley was sent by W. M. Sell, on the first day of May 1872.\*

All business was sent through Sonora as our repeating office. It is interesting to know that at that time the least charge for a telegram of 10 words or less to Sonora was \$1.00, to San Francisco, \$2.00, and to any of the eastern cities, \$6.00.

Although there were no wagon roads into the valley at that time, quite a lot of tourists visited it, all of whom came on foot or on horseback, and remained for days instead of for hours as at the present time. The telegraph office enjoyed a good business, and the Indians, of whom there were many, eagerly watched the wire to see the message passing over, only to be disappointed. They called me "Telegraph," and I always thought they considered me as a sort of superior being.

During that summer Mr. Cyrus W. Field, president of the Western Union Telegraph Company, was a guest at Hutchings's Hotel. He was taken ill while there, and I did what I could to make him comfortable. In appreciation he caused his lines to be connected up so that I was given the distinction of working direct with his New York office, that having been one of the very longest telegraph circuits worked over at that time.

\*Note that this date does not agree with those in the records cited on page 55.—Ed.



Fiske

Black's Hotel, Yosemite Valley, in the 1870's.

The following extracts which have a bearing on this history were assembled by Homer W. Robinson.—Ed.

from issues of *The Union Democrat*, weekly newspaper published in Sonora, under dates of May 11, 18, and 25, 1872, as filed in the office of the county recorder of Tuolumne County, these significant items appear:

May 11, 1872—

"Yo Semite Telegraph. H. L. Street, proprietor of the telegraph line between this place and Yo Semite Valley, started out with a force this week to put the line in order between Garrote and the Valley. That end of the line was not in use during the winter and in many places was blown and broken down. It is expected it will be in working order by the 20th inst."

May 18, 1872—

"The travel by stage to Yo Semite Valley, via Oak Flat and Garrote, will commence next week and the telegraph wires leading from this place to the Valley will be in working order in a few days."

May 25, 1872—

"Yo Semite Telegraph. The wires connecting Yo Semite Valley with the outer world are now in working order, and telegrams can be sent from the Valley to telegraph stations on this coast, the eastern States, and Europe."

From J. M. Hutchings, *In the Heart of the Sierras*, p. 358:

"For many years the Valley was in telegraphic communication with the outside world, via Sonora and Groveland; but as it was not sufficiently patronized after 1874 to pay for repairing the line and running the office, in a few years thereafter it went unrepaired, and was consequently unused. In 1882, however, a new one was constructed, by the Western Union Company, which is still maintained, via Berenda, Grant's Sulphur Springs, and Wawona to Yo Semite; so that now telegrams can be sent thence to every nook and corner of civilization."



## THE FLOWER "GARDEN" OF PARKER CREEK

By Harry L. Buckalew, Fresno

There are so many natural glories in Yosemite National Park that there is at least one to appeal to the particular interest of every admirer of Nature. Certainly not the least of these attractions is that marvelous series of natural flower "gardens" extending from the low canyon bottoms to the high mountain slopes. In so wide a range of altitude—2,000 to 13,000 feet—there is a correspondingly wide variety in the composition of the gardens. The hundreds of species found in the area are so grouped that, despite inevitable overlapping, every garden has its own unique makeup and character. Even amid this wealth of floral beauty, there is, to your author, a special charm about the plants associated with the contact zone between the usual granitic rocks and the overlying reddish metamorphic rocks that occur as remnants near the Sierran crest.

Carl Sharsmith, park ranger naturalist, has described in *Yosemite Nature Notes* the timberline gardens of Mount Dana.\* Lying a few miles to the south of Dana and just outside the eastern boundary of the park is the very unusual garden of Parker Creek. We refer here to the glacier fork of Parker Creek, fed by the melting ice and snow of the Parker Creek Glacier on the north flank of the saddle between Koip and Parker Peaks. All of the plants mentioned below are to be found within 300 feet of the creek along the Parker Pass Trail. At the trail crossing, the creek is spread widely and shallowly, so that by mid-July it is only 1 to 3 inches deep. It flows

over flattish, highly colored metamorphic shale.

Growing in clumps around the rocks, with their roots in most cases directly submerged in the cold water, are hundreds of plants of the dwarf or alpine lewisia. At the peak of the flowering season, about mid-July, this spot is a veritable fairyland. Peeking out shyly from the dark green clusters of rather succulent leaves are myriads of white blossoms, more or less suffused with rose pink. The plants are only 2 inches high but make up in density what they lack in height. Close examination shows a very thick taproot and sharply toothed sepals with conspicuous dark glands on these marginal teeth. In scientific nomenclature this plant is *Lewisia pygmaea* var. *glandulosa*, the genus named in honor of Capt. Meriwether Lewis, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific Northwest.

On a gentle rocky slope not over 50 feet north of the streamcrossing grows what is probably the showiest of our wild buckwheats—granite eriogonum (*Eriogonum lobbi*). The soft gray-green leaves lie in an attractively regular rosette on the ground, their blades resembling tiny ping-pong paddles. Radiating out from the center, like somewhat irregular spokes of a wheel, are the flowering stems which also lie on the ground. They are two to three times as long as the leaves and terminate in a dense mass of blossoms, which are deep rose in color, but from a distance take on a red-brown cast. Like all buckwheats they lack true petals, for the calyx possesses the color, the

\**Yosemite Nature Notes* 31(5):43-45, May 1952.



Anderson

headwaters of Parker Creek, outside eastern boundary of Yosemite National Park. Parker Creek Glacier and Koip Pass at left, Koip Peak at center, Kuna Glacier and Peak at right, Parker Pass at bottom right.

petals appearing like petals. The contrast in color between the gray-green of the leaves and the rose of the flowers, together with the symmetry of the rosette, make them truly handsome plants.

Growing intermingled with the previous species, in the southernmost station yet discovered, is the ballhead or many-flowered gilia (*Gilia congesta*). This little plant grows in fairly dense masses only 2 to 3 inches high. The leaves are cut into narrow segments, and stems, leaves, and calyces are covered with a loose webby hairiness. The pure white flowers are gathered in dense heads like balls at the ends of the erect stems. The flowers do not fall quickly but turn brown and remain on the plant for a considerable time. These plants are closely related to the aloxes, which are much more commonly found in the park.

Just south of the streamcrossing, where the trail begins its long and winding ascent to Koip Pass, are other interesting plants. There the brightly colored metamorphic rock is unstable and slidy, hence the plants must have sturdy roots to anchor them. One rugged little native is the Sierra oreocarya (*Oreocarya nubigena*), the name from the Greek meaning mountain nutlet. The plants are solitary and widely scattered, for water is scarce in this rocky surface. The plants grow 4 to 6 inches high and are stocky, with often three or four spikes of densely clustered white flowers. All visible parts of the plant except the petals are clothed with rather stiff bristles. The throats of the corolla tubes on the flowers are practically closed by a circle of prominent bright-yellow crests, making a pleasing contrast with the white of the petals.



Interspersed among the former are the alpine pussypaws (*Spraguea umbellata* var. *caudicifera*). This highland variety is sufficiently similar to its lowland cousin as to be recognizable, but is still distinct. The root is very long and stout, branching at its top. The plant is less erect and the basal rosette of leaves not so regular. The papery bracts separating the blossoms are much less conspicuous and the petals are paler in color.

Less frequent, but quite interesting, is a small plant of the mustard family which limits its growth to shaly alpine slopes—broad-podded anelsonia (*Anelsonia eurycarpa*). Only 2 to 3 inches high, its leaves are densely crowded, and the flowering stalk with its little group of yellow blossoms scarcely exceeds the leaves in height. The petals last very briefly, and between them rapidly grows the broadly oblong seed-pod which is the most conspicuous feature of the plant, pointing straight upward toward the heavens.

It remains for the sunflower family, however, to display the three largest and most prominent plants in our garden.

The woolly groundsel (*Senecio canus*) grows in the clefts and at the base of a rock buttress on the east side of the trail. The scientific name comes from the Latin "senex" meaning "old man"; the pappus or downy umbrella which floats the seed away on the breeze is very abundant and snowy white on this plant, reminding some fanciful botanist of an old man's hair. This groundsel reaches a height of half a foot or a little more and groups its plants in compact little bunches. The feltlike leaves are intriguing, for each has a long petiole that suddenly swells out into a broad elliptical blade which is often notched about three times at

the apex. The flowering stalks are terminated by bright yellow heads having five to eight rays.

Standing majestically aloof from other kinds of plants and even from their own brothers, on the west of the trail are fine specimens of what is probably the most robust herb in the Sierra at elevations above 11,000 feet—*Hulsea algida*. A wonderful example seen on Koip Pass (12,350 feet) was 10 inches tall and had 14 heads in flower simultaneously, all about an inch and a half in breadth. Similar plants are found on the Echo Peaks, the shores of Saddlebag Lake, and on nearly every high peak, and pass down to Mt. Whitney in the southern Sierra, where the species extends up to 14,000 feet. All parts of the plant except the petals are glandular-sticky to the touch and give off a pleasant balsamic scent when crushed. At the end of each stout stalk is just one broad flower-head with a large number of clean yellow rays ringed around an even larger number of disk florets.

By far the star of the show is the very rare wandering daisy (*Erigeron vagus*). Before Ranger Naturalist Sharpsmith had completed his detective work, the nearest to us that these plants were known was in southern Utah. By patient sleuthing he first found them on Excelsior Mountain, north of Saddlebag Lake. Then later a good colony was discovered high up on Parker Peak at about 12,000 feet. So far as he knows, your author is the first to report them near Parker Creek. Although this site is over a thousand feet lower than that on the peak, the group of plants there is probably an offshoot of the higher altitude colony. This daisy has the attribute—unusual among members of the sunflower family—of sending out underground runners which generate new plants.

It is probably this trait which accounts for the fact that the species is found only in loose sliding rock on moderately steep slopes. The plants grow in little clumps, separated by a few inches to a couple of feet, often with several of them joined underground by little runners about the diameter of a piece of wrapping string. The flowers are quite similar to those of the several other *Erigerons* found in the high altitudes of the park, but are a little paler in color. They stand about 5 to 8 inches high. Stems and leaves have a very erect white hairiness, while the tips of the leaves are three-notched. Despite the proximity of the Parker Creek colony to the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, there is still not one specimen of this rare plant known to occur inside the park. This group fails by just a little over a mile, for it lies that far south of bleak, windswept Parker Pass.

If this description of a rather unusual garden has awakened your interest sufficiently that you would like to see it for yourself, you can do it in a day with an early start. Six o'clock in the morning is a fine, clear, brisk time at Tuolumne Meadows. Mid-July is a good season to catch it in its prime. Park your car where the Mono Pass Trail takes off from the Tioga Road and follow the trail up to Parker Pass. Proceed a couple of miles farther toward Koip Pass and you have arrived. A little over 7 miles each way, it is. And if you like ornithology along with botany, sit down quietly at the Parker Creek trail crossing and watch the rosy finch dart up from a rock along the stream, catch an insect on the wing, and then alight upon another rock to enjoy his tasty tidbit. Maybe you'll also see a coney, a Yosemite toad, and a marmot or two. All in all, it will probably be a glorious day.

*Anderson*

Tuolumne Meadows scene: Lembert Dome at left, Mounts Dana and Gibbs in distance.



## AN ANIMAL FOOD CHAIN

By Doreen Lindsay, Yosemite Field School, 1953

The varied types of wildlife in Yosemite National Park and other wilderness areas are of immeasurable value for observation and enjoyment. Few of us, though, realize the importance of these different forms of wildlife to the animals themselves. Each kind eats different food. This works to the advantage of all, for if all animals in a habitat ate the same food they would soon devour the entire supply and thus starve themselves to death. Frequently an animal will feed on a creature smaller than itself, and then in turn will be eaten by an animal larger than itself. The feeding of one species on another in such a series is called a food chain, and is an important process in keeping Nature balanced.

A simple but typical food chain can be described and its implications appreciated. The living things involved in this example are coyotes, gophers, and grassy or meadowy plants.

A meadow is a place where many different animals live—some so lowly that they escape our notice. It also has various kinds of grasses, sedges, and other flowering plants growing in it. Food for great numbers of creatures is thus found in a well-kept meadow. If erosion or certain weeds such as thistle and klamath weed are allowed to limit the development of native plants, the animals which depend on them will die or move to a more favorable place because of lack of food.

One of the more common residents in meadows is the pocket gopher. This rodent subsists mainly

on the roots of plants. In order to be protected while feeding and also for most of the rest of his time, he digs many complex underground tunnels and chambers. Some of these are used for storage of vegetation for a time when food is not so abundant.

A description of the pocket gopher will help to identify his role in the meadow community. He has special adaptations of body structure which contribute to survival in his underground world. To aid in digging his tunnels he has long, powerful claws on the forefeet. Without these effective tools the gopher would have difficulty making headway through the often hard soil in which he lives. He sometimes uses his large incisor teeth to assist in the burrowing. These chisel-like teeth, like those of other rodents, are always sharp because they are constantly growing and have enamel on the front side only; this causes the soft back side to wear down on a bevel while the front edge is maintained at razor-sharpness. On the outside of the gopher's face are two cheek pouches, one on each side of the head. These fur-lined "pockets" (from which he gets his name) are used to carry food or nesting materials. The tail is another interesting feature. It is short and has a very sensitive tip. Should an enemy such as a gopher snake come down the gopher's burrow, the latter does not have to waste time turning around before fleeing, but can feel for obstructions with the tip of his tail and run backward almost as easily as forward.



The gopher is a useful animal. He could perhaps be called "nature's plow," for these creatures turn over many acres of soil annually, helping to aerate it and mix it with plant humus. They also make drainage tunnels which reduce surface runoff and increase water storage within the soil. Without the innumerable generations of gophers, many beautiful meadows might not exist today.

One of the enemies of the gopher who has earned an undeserved bad name is the coyote. This handsome predator normally feeds on small rodents such as the gopher. In many farming areas, however, these rodents have been decimated by poisoned grain, shooting, and trapping, leaving little natural food for the coyote to eat. The coyote is clever, though, so instead of starving to death he will attack domesticated farm animals such as chickens and even sheep. He will seldom do this if enough of his usual prey is available.

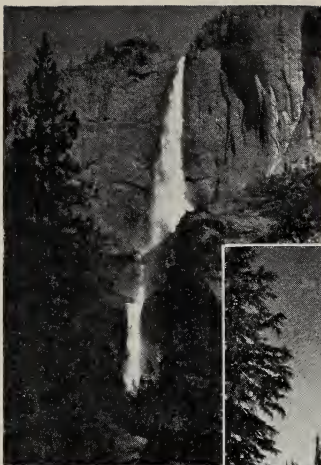
Despite their beneficial activities, there is danger of gophers becoming too numerous in a given area. They are prolific, and they may destroy good meadow lands when their

numbers increase beyond the carrying capacity of the area. Also, when burrowing rodents become too crowded, diseases and parasites flourish, some of which are hazardous to humans. If coyotes are allowed to live without hindrance they tend to keep the numbers of gophers down so that the threats attending overpopulation will not arise, yet enough gophers are left to work their beneficial effects.

In some agricultural regions coyotes, more than the gophers, are exterminated unreasonably. When this happens the meadows and pastures may become pock-marked with holes and mounds of earth and soon good land is ruined. In reality it would often be to the advantage of persons who kill indiscriminately all animals which they designate as harmful to leave them alone and let Nature take her course.

Nature has been in delicate balance for countless thousands of years in undisturbed areas like the national parks and seems to have done very well for herself without man's interference. We can profit by encouraging this balance elsewhere.

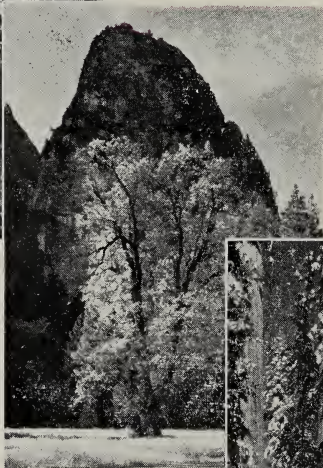




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